

Introduction

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People often ask me why I served as a superintendent for twenty-seven years. The answer is simple. But first, I need to tell you the story of my family. My parents had a formal fifth-grade education in the villages of Padilla and Jimenez in Northern Mexico. My dad wanted to date my mom, but she would not agree to date him unless he went to church. My dad was an orphan and had a bit of a wild streak, but he envied my mother's large family, so he eventually agreed.

After some time, my parents married, and my father became a minister. He and my mom taught themselves to read using the rigorous text of the Bible. They had ten children—five boys and five girls. My father wanted to move his family to the United States so they could get a great education. He kept accepting church assignments that would get him closer to the United States of America. I was the eighth child and the last one born in Mexico, in a modest house in Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas, a small town on the Mexico–United States border. When I was two years old, my father was awarded a minister position in Lubbock, Texas, in 1959, after the membership approved him by just one vote. I would later have a younger brother and sister, both born in Lubbock. Our huge family lived in an eight-hundred-square-foot home in East Lubbock.

My parents insisted that if we were going to make the sacrifice to be away from extended family it had better be worth it. So, they did everything in their power to ensure that we would do well in school. However, not all our schooling from Mexico transferred to the United States. My oldest two sisters had already been to a form of business school in middle years (equivalent to U.S. middle school) in Mexico, but the Lubbock Independent School District wanted to put them back in middle school despite them being fifteen and sixteen years old. Both became successful businesswomen. One became the tax assessor collector for the city of LaPorte, Texas. The other was an entrepreneur in San Antonio, Texas, where she ran a beauty shop in the Harlandale area of the city.

The rest of us all graduated from high school. In the 1970s, for a Latino family to have an 80 percent graduation rate among their kids was excellent by all accounts. Three of us went on to earn college degrees. But my parents' real legacy is that they have twenty-two grandchildren. Twenty of their grandchildren went to college and seventeen graduated with a bachelor's degree, including my three sons who graduated from Texas Tech University, Harvard, and

Princeton. The two grandchildren who did not attend college had special needs that prevented them from attending.

It is incredible to me the impact that school and education can have on the life of an individual—positive or negative—as well as on an entire family. My family is a walking testament to the positive effects. Just one generation removed from a life of poverty and immigration, through strong schools and my parents' desire for us to have more education, my siblings and I were able to graduate from high school and eventually send almost all grandchildren to college. Seeing the impact of education first-hand in the lives of my family and knowing how it can change a person's entire life trajectory is why I became a superintendent and educator; I've loved every minute of it.

The lessons I learned as a superintendent are nothing like what I learned in the classroom or even as a building administrator. Sure, there are skills like flexibility, time management, and adaptability that cross over, but the actual job of being a superintendent, especially in a large urban district, requires skills and understanding that I only learned the longer I lived in that role. It is for that reason that I sought to share these lessons with others through this book in the hopes that I can help you lead your urban district more effectively and more positively impact the lives of the students and families you serve.

A friend of mine once had to introduce me to a crowd before a speaking engagement. Unknowingly, she gave me one of the biggest compliments of my career. She introduced me as “the unapologetic Michael Hinojosa.” She is right, I am unapologetic about who I am. I am proud to be an immigrant, I am proud to be from the hood, *Oak Cliff!* I close every speech with the past, the present, and the future. Be proud of your past and never apologize for it. You are a product of your lived experiences, and you are a successful human being. In the present, be present—nothing great happens in the absence of enthusiasm. Look to the future with hope and aspiration. I am an optimistic person and I believe in the art of the possible! That is me: *unapologetic!*

How This Book Is Structured

In **Chapter 1**, I explain the importance of working with the school board. I also share the Success Triangle (see Figure 1.1) and how it can be used as a framework for balancing relationships and time

management as a superintendent. As part of working with the school board, I also share strategies for a successful entry plan that can help ensure new superintendents hit the ground running.

Chapter 2 shares lessons learned from navigating the waters of media and politics. As superintendents in large, urban districts, by default we must learn to play the media and politics game or we won't be around long enough to affect any kind of positive change for our students and staff. Whether it's in our day-to-day activities or during a crisis, the relationships we build with the media and government play a role in our effectiveness as a leader; the strategies and tips I share can help you stay in the driver's seat.

In **Chapter 3**, I share methods for identifying and nurturing excellence in your staff. Since human capital typically makes up approximately 80 percent of a school district budget, it is important to have the right people doing the right jobs. This will allow you to be a more effective leader who might even find time to think about strategically passing the torch one day.

In **Chapter 4**, I share how community relations and performance management—two things that people don't normally think of as being related—can work together to build relationships, promote trust and transparency, and transform school districts.

Chapter 5 begins with a discussion of a school district's theory of action: its value proposition. As district leaders, we must ensure that our districts remain focused on academic expectations, academic systems, and professional learning. However, if things fall off track or you step into a position with schools not performing to expectation, I share turnaround strategies and lessons learned from my experiences.

Chapter 6 takes a high-level view of operations. As a superintendent, especially a new superintendent, it can be intimidating to suddenly oversee so many more operational departments than when you were a building administrator. Having a high-level understanding of the purpose and function of each department can get you started so that you have a sense of the scope and can strategically choose where to focus attention more deeply.

In **Chapter 7**, we conclude with a discussion about ethics and equity. Although this could have easily been the first chapter of the book, we conclude with it as a reminder that ethics and equity is a foundation for everything else that we do. Without these, we can't

expect to be effective leaders or positively affect change in our districts. You can't just talk about equity; you have to deliver.

Features in This Book

- ▶ **Pro Tips:** Quick and practical ideas born from my experiences.
- ▶ **Hinojosa-isms:** These are sayings and phrases I say all the time. I may not have been the first to say them, but I've repeated them so many times it feels like it!
- ▶ **Sidebars:** The sidebars contain helpful information, such as definitions or added info for extra context.
- ▶ **The Big Ideas:** At the end of each chapter, you will find a bulleted list recapping the chapter's main takeaways.
- ▶ **Reflect and Act:** Please take the time to journal your thoughts and reflections at the end of each chapter. The Reflect and Act worksheet asks you to consider five As: what you agree with, what you would argue with, how you might apply the learning in your own district, and what actions you can take in your district and how you might hold yourself accountable for following through on those actions.

Let's get started!

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